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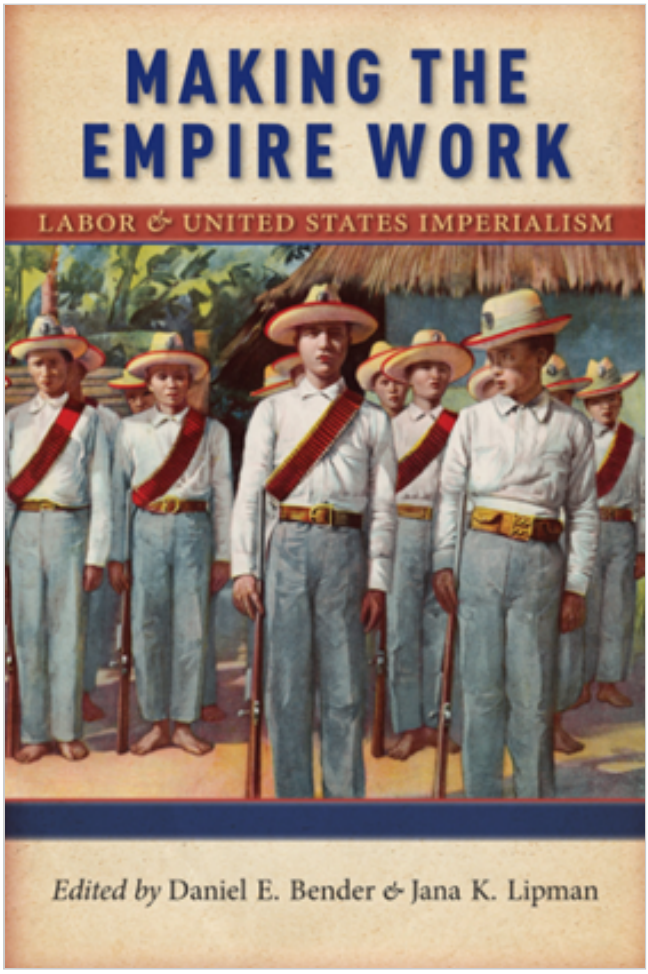
Labor in the U.S. empire: a historical perspective

Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism. Edited by Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman. New York: New York University Press, 2015, 384 pp., $35.00 paperback.



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U.S. involvement in global affairs increased considerably during the 20th century. Over this period, America fought in two world wars, took part in the postwar reconstruction of Japan and Europe, and promoted democracy in the wake of the Cold War. Yet, the transition into the 21st century saw many around the world reevaluate—and often object to—America's efforts. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the term "empire," with its negative connotation, has been used frequently in reference to the United States. Advocates of stronger U.S. intervention abroad contend that free nations need additional protection from foreign threats. At the same time, critics of U.S. foreign policy suggest that the country's overseas activities are an effort to expand American influence and power throughout the world. Those who generally accept the latter view see the U.S. empire as beginning with the acquisition of the Philippines, Cuba, Guam, and Puerto Rico in 1898, continuing after World War II, and expanding since 2001. However, the authors of *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism*, a 13-chapter anthology, trace the dawn of the empire to earlier times, uniquely claiming that it originated in 1863.

The book, edited by Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman, examines labor relations in the U.S. empire since the Emancipation Proclamation. In the introduction, editors Bender and Lipman explain that the concept of U.S. empire is defined by America's "geographical boundaries *and* by its labor system." This broad definition includes laborers in U.S. colonies, U.S. corporations abroad, and the U.S.

armed forces, thus expanding traditional notions of U.S. empire. In essence, the authors recount the experiences of forgotten imperial workers who, while neglected in previous research, “made the U.S. empire work.”

The volume consists of four thematic parts that outline the paradigm of U.S. empire from the perspective of trained historians. The four parts discuss “Solidarities and resistance,” “Intimacies in colonial spaces,” “Migration and mobilizing labor for the empire,” and “Imperial labor and control in the tropics.” Emphasis is given to imperial workers in the Caribbean, Asia–Pacific, and Central and South American regions; West Africa; and the United States. The overall objective of the authors is to challenge how historians have traditionally conceptualized the U.S. empire.

Opening the first part of the book, Julia Greene (chapter 1) examines the origins of the U.S. empire from the 1860s to the 1890s. She connects the U.S. westward military expansion during the Indian wars of the 1860s to the expansion abroad in the Spanish–American War of 1898. Further, she discusses the motivations behind the military’s participation in the U.S. empire, noting that, for the majority of U.S. servicemen, serving in the military was a way to enhance one’s social status and economic mobility. Shifting to the 1920s, Moon-Ho Jung (chapter 2), Christopher Capozzola (chapter 3), and Kevin Coleman (chapter 4) discuss how local labor engaged in collective resistance against U.S. imperial coercion. Jung evaluates East Asian labor strikes in Hawaii, outlining the struggle of that state’s workers against U.S. nationalist policies. Likewise, focusing on the Philippines, Capozzola provides a detailed account of contention and failed wage negotiations between U.S. colonial military officials and Filipino soldiers who served in the ranks of the U.S. military. Next, Coleman examines U.S. corporate expansion in Colombia, detailing the struggle of Colombian labor activists against the United Fruit Company (UFC). In that case, the Colombian government suppressed national labor laws in areas controlled by U.S. “banana imperialists,” allowing the UFC to have substantial influence over laborers.

The second part of the book looks at the creation of labor systems in the U.S. empire and at those systems’ social effects. Seungsook Moon (chapter 5) argues that U.S. territorial occupations at the end of World War II created high demand for sexual labor among servicemen near U.S. military bases. He conducts a comparative analysis of occupied countries in East Asia and Europe, focusing on sexual laborers as workers in the U.S. empire. Next, Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez (chapter 6) outlines Hawaii’s transition to a formal U.S. territory, which expanded the periphery of U.S. imperial reach. She also examines tourism—an industry that limited economic opportunities for natives in Hawaii. The essays offered by Moon and Gonzales both attempt to display the often ignored shadow economics that comes with imperial rule.

In the third part of the book, Andrew T. Urban, Dorothy B. Fujita-Romy, and Cindy Hahamovitch shift away from the empire-abroad theme, revealing the tumultuous labor experiences of U.S. immigrants. Urban (chapter 7) and Fujita-Romy (chapter 8) illustrate some adversities faced by immigrant workers in California. Specifically, Urban examines how debates about the domestic economic effects of open immigration policies for Chinese migrants in the 1880s led to the exclusion of Chinese workers from the state’s labor market. Building on the events recounted by Urban, Fujita-Romy discusses imperial labor mobility in the early 20th century. She describes how the influx of Filipino workers in California in the 1920s was met with violence by locals. Looking at subsequent decades, Hahamovitch (chapter 9) examines the emergence of guest-worker programs in the United States. According to the author, guest workers toiled in low-paying agricultural jobs, facing harsh working conditions in a labor system akin to indentured servitude.

In the final part of the book, Andrew Zimmerman (chapter 10), Jason M. Colby (chapter 11), Augustine Sedgewick (chapter 12), and Lauren Hirshberg (chapter 13) focus on how labor systems were imported and managed in the tropics. Zimmerman, in the only chapter dedicated to West Africa, analyzes the efforts of European colonial powers to implement a region-wide labor system based on that adopted by the United States after the Civil War. Turning to activities by U.S. corporations in the tropics, Colby revisits the UFC case in Colombia, detailing the firm's labor policy to import workers into the South American region from the 1890s to the 1920s. Further, Sedgewick indirectly links U.S. corporations' coffee production in El Salvador to the U.S. empire. In the final chapter, Hirshberg explores worker migration to the Marshall Islands during the Cold War. According to the author, in pursuing its national security objectives, the U.S. military exported high-skilled U.S. laborers to the remote island of Kwajalein, turning natives into domestic servants supporting the local economy established by the newcomers.

Overall, *Making the Empire Work* provides a heterodox perspective in labor history. Defining the U.S. empire by focusing on the structure of labor systems and the workers employed within imperial boundaries (in colonies, corporations, and the U.S. armed forces) goes well beyond traditional conceptions of the term. A major strength of the book is that it sheds light on larger world events through the experiences of specific regions and countries. Generally, the authors provide ample political, economic, and social context in presenting their views. Their rather meticulous, yet complex, analyses would best serve academics who see the United States as an empire.

Although the book's four parts follow a thematic layout, their underlying message is not always easy to discern. Incorporating prologues within each part would have solidified the narrative. It seems to me, however, that the book's major drawback is its depiction of U.S. corporations and the U.S. government as colluding in their external expansion. Several passages also describe U.S. corporations as the *de facto* rulers of the regions in which they reside. Together, these perspectives underplay both the political sovereignty a host nation might have and the autonomy a U.S. corporation might possess.

While the book offers a plausible account of the experiences of workers affiliated with the U.S. labor system, it tends to stretch the boundaries of U.S. expansion. All things considered, I was not overly convinced by the book's theory of labor exploitation and its concept of U.S. empire.